The Geography of Wisconsin, by John A. Cross and Kazimierz J. Zaniewski, offers a sweeping synopsis of the stone, soil, and settlement that has shaped the unique landscape of the Badger State. Anyone curious about that outcropping of rock behind their house, or what grows in the fields they pass on their way to work, or the provenance of both historic sites and new construction in their city will find answers to these queries and more in this book.

The authors proceed methodically across fourteen chapters, beginning with the physical landscape of the state—which includes a sustained examination of the diverse effects of glaciation—the weather, and the vegetation, before committing five middle chapters to human settlement and agriculture. The book concludes with five chapters on transportation, manufacturing, urbanization, culture and politics, and recreation and tourism. Within each topic area, the authors wed a keen historical perspective with current data, explaining how centuries of landscape change in Wisconsin can help us understand the metrological, economic, and social events of the past few years. The pages are graced with scores of high-quality color photographs—many captured by the authors themselves—and, of course, maps. Each map in The Geography of Wisconsin tells many stories, often combining percentages and relative densities with total measurements to give the reader a nuanced appreciation for the phenomena in question. Most maps report data by county and contain easy-to-read keys and informative descriptions.

I am not proud to say I have never taken a course on geology, but even those with a working knowledge of bedrocks and geomorphology may be daunted by the second chapter, “Wisconsin's Physical Landscape.” Such phrases as “Precambrian metamorphosed mafic intrusive rock” slide by without much clarification (p. 23). After a couple passes and not a few Google searches, I was able to parse the more technical descriptions and reap the rewards of the authors' attention to geological details. The third chapter, “Climate, Vegetation, and Soils of Wisconsin,” includes better explana-
tions of weather phenomena, and from there on‐
ward the text is straightforward and readable.

While the impressive scope of The Geography of Wisconsin cannot be denied, the authors devote relatively few pages to indigenous settlement before and after statehood. There is a short discussion of the mound-building societies at the begin‐
ning of the fifth chapter, “Settlement of Wisconsin 1: Fur Trading and Mining,” but, as its title sug‐
gests, the chapter swiftly transitions to the French fur trade. After this, Native Americans are mostly absent except for two passing mentions in the fi‐
nal chapters, where the authors present data on the ethnic ancestry of current Wisconsinites and briefly discuss the gambling industry. In comparis‐
on, Wisconsin’s Past and Present: A Historical At‐
las (1998) includes sections (albeit short) on the Ho-Chunk, Ojibwe (Anishinaabe), and Potawatomi tribes and explores historical and contemporary conflicts over land and resources between native and settler Wisconsinites.

The Geography of Wisconsin also lacks serious attention to the politics of the Badger State, which, as it happens, is another topic on which Wisconsin’s Past and Present excels. While the work under review contains just a few pages on the geo‐
graphical distribution of Democrats and Republic‐
ans in the last decade, the earlier work explores over a century’s worth of presidential election re‐
turns, gubernatorial election returns, and the politics of race, class, and gender in Wisconsin. Of course, this data necessarily leaves off before the turn of the century, so it seems The Geography of Wisconsin missed an opportunity to update the political geography of the state. From the simmer‐
ing “politics of resentment,” to COVID-19 man‐
dates, to Black Lives Matter and “Defund the Po‐
lace” activity, to the renewed politics of abortion access, this aspect of geography should not go un‐
addressed.[1] Still, every study has its blind spots as well as its highlights. For readers primarily in‐
terested in such topics as geomorphology and the Wisconsin economy—especially its agricultural sector—it is hard to imagine a study more thor‐
ough than The Geography of Wisconsin.

I will return to The Geography of Wisconsin often as I continue to understand this surprisingly wonderful and wonderfully surprising state. Cross and Zaniewski have given Wisconsinites—and Wisconsinophiles from other lands—something invaluable: the gift of seeing our world anew.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


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